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ABSTRACT

This paper on Southeast Asian government information and official publications (GIOPs) begins with a general overview of new ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) members (Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, and Vietnam) as well as founding members (Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore). Information technology (IT) applications in GIOPs are assessed for each country according to their relative development, accessibility, availability, and transparency. The following topics related to Southeast Asian GIOPs are then discussed: (1) decreasing availability of GIOPs as governments privatize and corporatize; (2) information rich versus information poor; (3) IT as the panacea of information and knowledge gaps and problems; (4) preservation and conservation; (5) depositions, bibliographic control, and availability; (6) authenticity and verification; (7) freedom of and access to information--a concomitant process of an open market economy; and (8) national IT and information policy and implementation. (Contains 26 notes and 9 references.) (MES)

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Government Information and Information about Governments in Southeast Asia: a new era? An overview [1]

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Paper

Introduction

The most recent published literature on Southeast Asian government information and official publications (GIOPs) can be found in Guide to official publications of foreign countries, second revised edition,1997 and Information sources in official publications,1997. Coverage in these two titles has been mainly on printed sources, with little or no mention of electronic sources, which will also be discussed in this paper.

General Overview

The political, economic and social developments in Southeast Asia are so diverse amongst all the ten countries[2] that they span the spectrum of underdeveloped (least less developed, less developed), developing and developed status as defined in the United Nations (UN) official standard of "Human Development Index" (HDI). And it follows that, more or less, the "state of the art" of their respective GIOPs reflects that of the UN HDI.

At one end are the latest entrants to ASEAN, beginning, in this order, with Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos; followed by Vietnam and Brunei. At the other end are the founding members of ASEAN, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, in this order, as assessed according to their relative GIOP "development", accessibility, availability and transparency.

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The New ASEAN Four

Myanmar

It appears that, despite its membership into ASEAN, the GIOP record of Myanmar has not departed much from that before its entry; on the contrary, since its entry into ASEAN, there have been inexplicable delays in the issuance of some important titles such as the annual Review of social and economic conditions[3] normally available in April. There appears to be an accelerating trend in reverse in Myanmar to withhold or suppress government information since the 60s[4]. The Burmese Gazette used to be in English and Burmese, but only the Burmese has been issued since 1985. There is even less information released since 1996 when U Than Shwe was appointed Chairman of the reconstructed State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) which replaced the SLORC (State Law and Order Revolutionary Council). Annual statistics are two to three years late and monthly statistics several months late.

Cambodia and Laos

In the case of Cambodia and Laos, the latter since before its entry into ASEAN, has been progressively improving its record of GIOPs, especially on statistics having been made aware of ASEAN requirements for regular disclosure of basic social and economic indications. As for Cambodia, the situation has taken a setback from what little improvement had been gained in the interim years since the UN-supervised general elections of May 1993, due to the recent political crisis. But with the return of UN, Funding and NGO bodies assisting in its infrastructural development and capacity building, the compilation of basic statistics and analyses, and issuance of GIOPs should go back on track.

Vietnam

Apart from basic economic data and indicators, the Vietnamese have been publishing and releasing more than ever before, especially in English and on economic data; but the political ones are as usual rare and less forthcoming, given its socialist structure of government. All the Ministries and Departments issue their own information except for vital statistics and economic data which are centrally controlled through the Central Statistical Office. Almost all information published in Vietnam can be deemed GIOPs, except for innocuous light titles in the arts through "private" presses.

The ASEAN Six

Unlike the above-mentioned newer members of ASEAN, all six countries have legal provisions for the deposit of government GIOPs at their respective National Libraries and/or National Archives. Nevertheless, almost all have been hampered by the lack of monitoring facilities and manpower to effectively collect all GIOPs, let alone develop proper and timely bibliographic controls. Many government committees, especially interagency ones which may also include NGOs (Non-government organizations and the private sector or individuals) set up to work on specific issues, for instance, produce limited numbers of reports which escape the net, and it would be difficult to locate the issuing authority for copies. This aside, the dearth of GIOPs in Brunei remains unchanged. In all these countries, there is no central government "bookshop" or exclusive bibliographic control mechanism that facilitate easy and speedy access to GIOPs as one can find in the U.S. or the U.K. There is no comprehensive national policy on their archiving for preservation and conservation.

Indonesia

As Indonesia is in a state of flux, and in the throes of a dramatic social, political and economic upheaval, the somewhat scattered initiatives of various official sectors to document, publish and release more government information in conventional and electronic formats, have been held back or slowed down considerably. Notwithstanding, symptomatic with the national

mood and popular demand for more openness in the democratic process, since the last year or so, there have been selective public sector releases and publications of significant official information not seen before. One of the most important releases has been The Final Report of the Joint Fact-finding Team (TGPF) on the May 13-15, 1998 Riots[5], in October 1998. Along with that has been an upsurge of instances of speeches and pronouncements emanating from office holders, from the President, his spokesperson, cabinet ministers, the military chief to other government personnel. These have been issued mostly through the mass media, especially the printed press.

There is certainly a growing sense of openness in regard to GIOPs during this transitional period. And certain government departments continue to be active in providing vital information, especially in regard to the processes of democratization such as on electoral issues. During this interim period, availability of more GIOPs is constantly challenged by a sudden floodgate of a freer press and media. Whether this situation will be reversed after the imminent general and presidential elections is a moot question.

The Philippines and Thailand

In both countries, in recent years considered to have adopted political democracies more akin to those of western models than those practised by Malaysia and Singapore, and where civil society is taking what appears to be deep and irreversible roots, there have been relatively higher proliferation of GIOPs. The much freer and independent press and media sector vigilantly monitors and calls for more transparency in government practice and accountability, resulting in more and easier access to GIOPs. The more open and competitive quasi government sector, including the many tertiary institutions, contribute to the increasing volume of GIOPs. By far, the Philippines has been more prolific than any other of the ASEAN countries.

Malaysia and Singapore

Although by normal standards, basic and vital indicators are current and easily available, and government policies and non-controversial socio-economic, including scientific and technical data and information, are documented and accessible, governed by legislative remnants[6] of their colonial past, and perhaps coloured by similar histories of communist insurgencies and racial unrests[7], certain GIOP access and availability especially in areas perceived as politically sensitive, are still off limits. The lack of press freedom and freedom of speech have not been helpful to instigate more of such GIOPs.

Interestingly however, in a bitter fight recently with opponents within the ruling party, the Malaysian Prime Minister released a flood of what would have been deemed "official secrets", name lists of indigenous Malays privileged with share allocations and other government contracts and business handouts. And in the current "aberration" of political discontent, with the younger electorates not prepared to accept the status quo and shunning most of the government-controlled mainstream media, turning instead to NGO (Non-government organizations), opposition party newsletters and the Internet, there is some evidence of more GIOPs in otherwise taboo areas being released. The most evident of all was the publication of the Royal Commission report of police assault of the sacked Deputy Prime Minister. Singapore, for quite different reasons, recently announced a host of measures to "loosen" up the banking sector, amongst a plethora of steps to create a more open and competitive economy; and one beneficiary is transparency in strategic sectors, which would correspondingly include more releases of GIOPs. Nevertheless, where deemed a sensitive area, certain data would not be available, such as the breakdown of foreign immigrant labour by country.

Information Technology (IT) Applications in GIOPs

Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam

In the three newer ASEAN members and Indonesia, there has been little apparent evidence of any policy articulation on the way forward for releasing and producing more GIOPs in electronic formats in the wake of the next century, although there have been noticeable increases especially of economic and social data and information in such developing economies like Indonesia and Vietnam. The increase in quantity can be largely attributed to the requirements of funding agencies such as the World Bank, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Ford Foundation, and indeed ASEAN, for such data. Also, Vietnam, although a socialist country, is aware that economic development, especially in the business and industrial sector, is better served by making available more vital indicators and data.

There is no government web site, or any electronic retrieval/storage databases in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam; Myanmar has recently mounted a web site on its government, and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs which have only basic information. In these countries, there is still a guarded approach to the publishing of GIOPs in electronic formats, simply that they would be overtly open to public scrutiny and potential "abuse", and the state would lose control of the situation. Of course, the problem of the lack of capacity due to the absence or shortage of skilled manpower and funding is a big underlying negative factor. However, there seems to be a more relaxed view[8] towards the provision of Internet and email access, except in Myanmar which does not allow individual accounts: a government appointed agency sieves through all messages and faxes only those regarded "harmless" (to the State) to the individual for a steep annual and per message fee.

Indonesia

Despite the absence of a central coordinating body or evidence of government-driven IT policy for the country, in Indonesia, especially in Jakarta, several ministries and government departments have mounted web sites but provide mainly information and their coordinates. The Statistics Department offers alternative formats of their monthly and other outputs in diskettes. The universities, quasi government agencies and some departments continue to provide information through their Web sites, some including citation announcements of their publications. However, by and large, they are informational and not interactive.

Brunei

As for Brunei, as with its other national programmes, it has been a low-key and gradual process; its only university has a web site and most of its government ministries and departments have web sites. But these are mainly informational with no interactive or on-line databases of text or citation records; there is no online facility, interactive or otherwise of any government databases, nor is there known to be any existing electronic databases.

In September 1998[9], the Brunei government launched its nation-wide broadband IT network RaGAM21 (Rangkaian Global Aliran Multimedia - Global Multimedia Network System). The US$30 million project which aims to connect Brunei community "electronically globally", has as one of its building blocks the BIIIG (Brunei Info-Communication Infrastructure Interacting Globally) telecommunication infrastructure. The ultimate goal of this all encompassing project is to enable Brunei "to prepare for the new age of global multimedia network and electronic commerce thereby boosting and securing Brunei's role and place in the competitive global economy in the 21st century" which would allow for Brunei to plug into global multimedia faceted e-commerce, trade, tourism. As the implementation of the concept is still in its nascent state, it would be interesting to observe how this national IT programme is translated into the enhancement of GIOPs considering the conservative nature of its government.[10]

The ASEAN Four

At the other end of the scale, four[11] of the five founding members of ASEAN are forging ahead with their GIOP "programmes", albeit at different levels, depth and speed, in policy articulation/orientation, development and implementation; in the main, embracing opportunities afforded by developments in information technology (IT), while releasing more information on paper and in electronic databases, and publishing more through their respective national printers, ministries, departments, and/or through commercial publishers.

In the lead up to the next century and new millennium, all four governments have clearly acknowledged that their countries' competitive edge will hinge upon an open economy underpinned by an information/knowledge-based society. They have identified information technology (IT) as a primary strategic tool that will drive the engine of economic growth. The implications are profound, in that information, especially government information, needs to be more and readily available, and the opportunity and right of user access will be enhanced.

The Philippines and Thailand

In the Philippines and Thailand, considered to have adopted political democracies more akin to those of Western models than those practised by Malaysia and Singapore, and where civil society is taking what it seems to be deep and irreversible roots, by a good measure, there have been relatively higher proliferation of GIOPs. There, their governments have started since the early 1990s[12] to incorporate information technology (IT) application into their routine intra-departmental communication link-up, as well as encouraging the development of IT products in the storage and dissemination of GIOPs not only for government but also for public consumption.

Both the Thai and Philippine governments have called their IT concept plans IT-2000 and NITP[13]-2000 (and later a more comprehensive policy formulation called IT21) respectively. Amongst its major three-prong programmes for a comprehensive IT application throughout Thailand[14], the concept strongly advocates government agencies at all levels to apply IT to their work, develop information networks and public databases for their own use, for businesses and the general public. Examples of government plans to initiate databases include statistical information, agriculture price information and extension services, education data, public health and patient records, laws and regulations, business registrations, international trades and markets, natural resources, energy, weather forecast, tourism, land, sea and air transportation, land ownership, etc.[15] The Thai government started to work on a systematic but low key approach to IT development in 1992, but it was only in May 1997 that it had approved a large budget for IT Projects for National Development[16].

Although there are as many web sites as there are core government institutions, the publication of GIOPs in electronic formats is still embryonic is some cases, and absent in most. Most of the web sites are informational, containing organizational coordinates, directories of staff, summaries of activities, and are not linked and non-interactive. The quasi government institutions have done better, such as tertiary institutions where there are two university networks THAILINET-M (Thai Academic Library Network) (started in 1993) and PULINET (Provincial University Libraries Network) (started in 1986) which have been developed to link the libraries' online catalogues (but only bibliographic) amongst other cooperative programmes. There are plans to merge the two online networks to form a national information network to provide at least 30 databases of bibliographic catalogues, full-text databases, digital libraries and electronic loan system.

In the Philippines, the two "themes" in its national strategic plan are anchored in "global competitiveness" and "people empowerment", which would establish "an informal but close cooperation between government, business and labour/NGOs; adopt achievable development targets; and maximize the use of information as "the great strategic resource of the 21st century that will enable the country to respond to threats and opportunities in the world marketplace"[17]. And amongst its NITP strategies are the "formulation and implementation of a

Government Information Management Plan" and the "establishment of a national information management communication network". Its October 1997 NITP for 21st century or IT21 agenda spelt out "specific time frames for establishing these goals", i.e., from the present to the 2010.[18] Over US$20 million have been invested in IT infrastructure development nationwide.

Philippine government ministries and departments are being linked within Ministries or inter departmentally. Over 100 have web sites. Most have information on their policies, staffing directory, coordinates, and publication lists. The Statistics Department which is one of the most prolific, provides useful information on them. Some public domain GIOP databases are being developed and available on web sites, such as the National Statistics QuickStats, the Economic Indicators Online (EIO), and the Commission of Elections voters' list.

Malaysia

Malaysia has been touting its Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) plan since June 1997. At the heart of the concept plan is Cyberjaya, a Silicon Valley type of enclave of 750 square kilometres (15 by 50 km) carved out of plantation and jungle land, located in between the proposed new administrative capital Putrajaya and the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA). The MSC development project has been single-mindedly and uncompromisingly pursued by the prime minister himself, in which he expounds the scenario of a paperless (electronic) government administration as a lead component project, amongst a list of IT applications.[19] The Prime Minister's Office will lead the Federal Government relocation to Putrajaya, rushed to completion, in June 1999.

Vowing to lead by example, the government pumped in US$1,055 million in its Seventh five-year development plan (1996-2000) into IT, and has spent more than US$9 million in training civil servants, installing IT equipment and networks to connect ministries and departments and providing and encouraging state and local governments to do likewise. The Civil Service Link (CSL) (later upgraded to CSL Gateway) project aims to develop a "paperless" electronic communication network in government, beginning with the Federal government. Central to this is the exhortation to all federal and state governments to adopt and embrace IT like never before into their daily work routines and in the provision of information. As a result, since 1996, there has been a proliferation of web sites ("277 homepages") set up by ministries and departments. Most of them are informational, less are interactive, and even less provide online access to databases whether bibliographic, statistical or textual. And many web sites have not been kept up to date, and have drawn public criticisms, and especially scathing attacks in the press condemning them as "cobwebs" (New Straits Times, 24 Jan 1999). Nonetheless, press releases from some ministries and speeches of some ministers (especially those of the prime minister), have been available from their web sites.

The universities and some statutory bodies have done better with more current information, such as Palmolis (Palm Oil Research Institute of Malaysia) and Sirimlink (Standards and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia) now available on a fee-basis via their respective webs. Masticlink, is a public domain Malaysian Science and Technology collection of science and technology databases which available free if charge. By and large, aside from providing mainly informational web sites and online bibliographic catalogues and databases, most have not advanced substantially in GIOP provisions.

Singapore

Singapore's response to the IT hype in June 1996 is the Singapore One[20] project, subtitled A Network for Everyone, which was conceptualized as a master plan to transform the city-state into an "intelligent" city. As a ten-year IT development plan with a US$2 billion infrastructure budget, it is aimed at a comprehensive broadband network of all government and commercial offices, including 800,000 homes on the National Information Infrastructure (NII) backbone. As in the case of the other three IT-motivated countries, again, the thrust of the plan is

underpinned by direct government sector involvement. By far, Singapore surpasses the rest, being the world's first nation-wide broadband network. And to underscore the strategic significance of this government-driven integrated IT network, a new ministry has been recently established as the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), indeed a demonstration of the government's determined political will and resolve to accelerate and forge ahead of the pack. All this IT development is kept on the fast track, despite the Asian currency crisis and the recession, to boost its global competitive edge.

Needless to say, all its ministries, departments and statutory bodies have well maintained and informative web sites. A good number are interactive and have impressive hyperlinks, and Intranets for effective civil service communication. Many government services, such as income tax submissions, application forms, etc., are online. Online public access databases, most available on the web, include the eGazette on Singapore Government gazettes, LawNet which contains Singapore law research, litigation and conveyancing, Singstats Datashop on Singapore official statistics, and Globalink which supplies a number of online trade databases, such as the Singapore trade connection on exports and imports. All these are fee-based, some with minimal fees on a cost-recovery basis.

A New Era for Southeast Asian GIOPs?

Decreasing availability of GIOPs as governments privatize and corporatize

In tandem with the recognition amongst the ASEAN Four that the new millennium will usher in the Information Age, there has been a growing pattern of down-sizing government and privatizing[21] basic public amenities such as road works, telecommunications, electricity, water supply and even education. This has removed the onus of such information and data collection and provision from the government (public) domain into that of the private sector or corporatized arm of government. This development will impact on the provision of and access to relevant information in a civil society, if the principle of proprietory information (so-called company secrets) in the context of private ownership is invoked. It would thus be useful to monitor the situation in these countries, and to consider the need for legislation to compel mandatory disclosures of certain core and basic data and information for the public good.

As one of many measures being taken to restructure the banking sector, identified as the mother that triggered off this current recession, the Singapore government is vigourously pursuing a more open system which would require more disclosures.[22]

Information rich versus information poor

Then, there arises the issue of affordability to basic data and information, which are now being charged, some on a cost-recovery basis, others for profit. It has become particularly fashionable, especially in Malaysia[23] for public institutions to charge exorbitantly even for public domain information and publications or their reproductions, particularly for electronic-based ones. The danger of widening gaps between the information-haves and have-nots is being revisited, and right at the doorstep of what should otherwise be public domain information and publication source.

And unless the availability and affordability of IT equipment and services is pervasive nation-wide, a further erosion of equitable access is inevitable. The danger of urban-rural divide is exacerbated. IT literacy and adequate IT training and education are serious issues which must be addressed by governments without further delay.

IT as the panacea of information and knowledge gaps and problems

Prevalent amongst government officials (and indeed in many other sectors as well) is the misconstrued notion that IT is an all-in-one solution (Child, 1997), forgetting that it is only an

enabling tool, and neglecting the substantive informational inputs, their regular updates and appropriate maintenance of related software and hardware. In the enthusiasm to embrace IT, most governments in the region have climbed on the high horse, touted its importance, and maximized mass media publicity at the outset. Unfortunately, in some cases policy enunciation has become flawed in mere rhetoric: policy has not been translated into implementation, described as the "chasm between the mindsets of the implementers and policy-makers" (New Straits Times, 25 January, 1999). For instance, despite initial related training programmes of staff and provision of funding, it appears that many IT projects have been left to languish after the high profile start-up. This apparent malaise is evident in many Malaysian government web sites (New straits times press, 24 January, 1999), as well as in the absence or lack of conversion of paper to electronic formats of publications and databases of which IT formats are clearly superior options for updating, ease of use, better access and availability. Nevertheless, even with just announcements of publications, list of publications, speeches, events and the like in some web sites, these are an improvement over the absence of the Internet in the past.

Preservation and conservation

In the desire to digitize information and offer them electronically, there is a serious lapse in policies and procedures on their preservation and conservation. Conventional print and microform formats have withstood the test of time, but not IT storage formats, where standards are still being worked out or allowed to find their own levels in the marketplace in the software and hardware components. As is well known, every 10 to 18 months, IT machines, software and even networks become obsolete. And with the proliferation of web sites and an increasing number of online link-ups, conversion to CD-ROMs and the like, as well as diskette and server storage, there is a genuine case of concern that governments, especially library and informational professionals, must address this and related archival issues with some urgency. Many web sites and online databases carry short archival periods of electronic documents. In Malaysia, the National Library of Malaysia has recently formed a national committee to deal with this and other related issues, one of which is the inordinate updated versions of papers, articles and speeches mounted on the web giving rise to questions of which version(s) should be "saved", and how many in the process.

Legal deposit provisions have also to be considered and updated to include digital information, where even in existing legislations, few have explicitly included ministries and governments in compulsory requirements to deposit their publications with an appointed agency (usually with the National Library), and where the materials have not been defined to include digitized formats.

Depositions, Bibliographic control and Availability

Not all Legal Deposit Acts explicitly include ministries and government departments. This "silence" must be addressed. And although most of the countries with legal deposit provisions have entrusted a central body such as the National Library, to implement the Act, most GIOPs escape the net, due mostly to the ignorance or lack of support of such a requirement from the departments' staff. There is also the low priority accorded at the national library end (hence lack of staffing) which depends on automatic deposits from the commercial sectors instead of field staff to aggressively collect such materials: legal recourse of non-deposits is unrealistic given that the culprit is another government department. Bibliographic control also receives low priority, with issues as late as one to two years. Most titles have short print-runs and limited distribution. There is no central agency apart from the government printers (which sell only what they print, and most GIOPs are not done through them), like a GIOP bookshop selling all GIOPs.

Authenticity and Verification

The issue of authentic and legal versions of government documents in electronic formats,

especially those obtained from the web and other online formats has still to be addressed; and they must be done soon, especially in the case of Malaysia and Singapore which are forging ahead to facilitate GIOP provisions electronically. The courts still regard only hard copies as the authoritative copies. Policies adopted would greatly assist library and information centres in their services and collection development and general public access.

Freedom of and access to information: a concomitant process of an open market economy

The wide gap in economic, social and political development between one group of countries in the region (all in the continent), and the other group (all except for one, are insular) is reflected also in the state of the art in their GIOPs, including their digitized forms. The case of the Philippines and Thailand where western-style democracy has evolved, accompanied by freedom[24] of and access to information, demonstrates that GIOPs will be more available and accessible. And even if the political sector is slow to "loosen up", the underlying imperatives of competitive open economic and free-market systems for accurate and speedy availability and access to vital statistics and information are bound to compel, pressurize or motivate governments to be more responsive to user and public GIOP demands, as has been surprisingly heeded by Vietnam. Even so, the globalization of every facet of societal activities, so hard-driven unmercifully by IT, will further enhance the availability of and access to GIOPs in the rest of the region.

National IT and information policy and implementation

As governments in the region are leapfrogging and jumping onto the IT "frenzy" bandwagon, it would do well for each one to take stock of existing policies and assess current situations vis a vis achievables, and for newer ones to ensure that there must be policies to define the framework, agenda and strategy that the country wants and can adopt. This aside, the provision of and access to GIOPs must be integrated into a holistic policy framework for IT and information; such as what GIOPs should continue to be issued in hardcopy, and what in soft copy in the context of their timeliness, time-sensitive nature and their archival value. So far, there has been an absence of national debate and discussion.

Conclusion

In the light of the globalization of human activity, underpinned by the unrelenting and pervasive force of IT, there is no doubt in the foreseeable future[25], that GIOPs in Southeast Asian countries will be more available and accessible. The push and pull factors of globalization, democratization, developments of open economies, and the inevitable and eventual development or maturation of civil society will result in more timely and better quality and substantive GIOPs in the region.

Indeed, depending on the existing state of development of each country, there are different degrees of "openness"and "transparency" in the type and depth of data, information and publications available in different formats and accessibility amongst the ten countries. More or less, this will be reflected by and dependent on the "progress" in the political processes such as in democratization, in the intrinsic values embodied in civil society, and in the embracing of an open market economy. While there is optimism that most countries will catch up in this regard, the inherent attendant problems and issues discussed above must be addressed and resolved.

In the imminent approach to the 21st century, and on the eve of the new millennium, the latest global Information Society Index[26] has placed Singapore in fourth place, Malaysia in 34th, Thailand 45th, the Philippines 46th and Indonesia in 54th place. In the lead up to the new millennium, how this is translated into a proliferation of more and better GIOPs in all formats, including IT-based, depend on the political, economic and social processes (and development)

in each country.

FOOTNOTES:

1 Surname: Ch'ng [Email address: chngks@iseas.edu.sg].

2 The ten countries are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, all of which are members of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations formed in 1967, the latest entrants being Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar in 1997, Myanmar (1998) and Cambodia (1999).

3 This is a requirement of ASEAN. Ironically it was always on time before it became a member of ASEAN.

4 There was more access to government information during the colonial period, than at present, when statistical information and publications were systematically collated and produced, and censuses were held and published regularly. The last general census held was 1983. See Statistics on the Burmese economy, the 19th and 20th centuries. Compiled by Teruko Saito and Lee Kin Kiong. Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1999.

5 There has never been an investigation team (comprising NGOs as well) of this nature and mandate, nor such a report ever made public during the 30-year Suharto rule.

6 The Official Secrets Act: in 1994, the Singapore government charged five persons, one of them a high level official in the central bank, for unauthorized and untimely release of the economic growth "flash estimate" of 4.6 per cent of the 1992 second quarter. The trial lasted 42 days and all of them were found guilty and fined - "to establish a principle: that any breach of the OSA would be acted upon". (Straits Times, 1 April, 1994).

7 The Sedition Act: in 1998, a parliamentary oppositionist was jailed for 18 months (thus losing his legislative seat) for publishing statutory rape allegations against a ruling party politician, who was then the chief minister of a state.

8 Interestingly, recently the long-time Malaysian Prime Minister, determined to push for international support for his pet IT projects, swiftly overruled his functionaries who had threatened to introduce censorship policy because of anti-government postings and messaging. And also recently the Singapore government made unreserved apologies to Internet users for unannounced "intrusions" by a local Internet provider with assistance from the Ministry of Home Affairs of Internet accounts to check for "viruses" .

9 Borneo Bulletin, 22 Sept, 1998

10 Brunei Darusalam is an absolute monarchy.

11 Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

12 Unfortunately, the Asian currency and economic crisis has dampened the speed somewhat.

13 National Information Technology Plan

14 Dubbed the IT master plan for Thailand, its three "pillars" are "better telecommunications and networking infrastructures, the need to improve intellectual skills of workers and good governance".

15 See Towards social equity & prosperity: Thailand IT policy into the 21st century. National Information Technology Committee (NITC) Secretariat, 1997; Getting ready for the new

millennium: what are the Thai Government's actions towards the year 2000, 1997 report; IT projects into the future, by Thwaweesak Koanantakool, 1998.

16 The allocation was for 4.2 billion bahts (US$335 million) (Over a three (?) year period.)

17 See The National Information Technology Plan (NITP) within the context of Philippines 2000.

18 See IT agenda action for the 21st century (1997). Manila, NITP

19 The MSC comprises seven flagship applications, viz., multimedia applications, electronic (paperless) government, multipurpose smart card, telemedicine, and smart schools.

20 It is a better articulated and focused plan than its precursor the 1992 IT2000 concept.

21 Ostensibly to reduce public spending and create competition, and in many cases, it is just a matter of changing hands, with little or no competition as it becomes a monopoly. Worse, it removes accountability from the public sphere when hitherto periodic reports would have to be made to the legislature. There is an absence of a regulatory body, as in certain western countries.

22 Be that as it may, ironically, under the Official Secrets Act , the government charged four officials, amongst whom was a high-ranking official of the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), under the Act for disclosing, before the Minister did, the growth rate for the year.

23 This seems to be an over-enthusiastic response to the Malaysia Inc. concept in which many public sector activities are being perceived as potentials for corporatization and privatization, for which subsidies are reduced or withdrawn, and the agency is expected to earn its own revenue. The flavour of the month is education, and universities which are being targeted, are responding by increasing all their fees and prices of their products.

24 In both countries, there is unfettered press freedom, to the extent that some tabloids, especially in the Philippines have taken undue advantage and become irresponsible, causing the new President to take out libel suits against them recently.

25 Except for Mynamar

26 Bangkok Post, 28 April 1999. None of the other Southeast Asian countries made it to the ranking as this International Data Corp (IDC) "ISI report tracks data from 55 countries that collectively account for 97 per cent of the global GDP and 99 per cent of IT expenditures". It makes estimates and forecasts up to 2002 for "23 different variables spanning four infrastructure categories", which include "information rank", "computer rank" and "Internet rank".

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[See various government web sites.]

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